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Original Article

Factors Contributing to Delayed Marriage among Youth: A Cross-Sectional Study in Northwestern Iran

Sahar Zari[1], Monir Kangari[2*], Ali Jafari-Khounigh[3,4]

[1]Department of Management, North Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
[2]Marand Health and Treatment Network, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran
[3]Department of Statistics and Epidemiology, Faculty of Health, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran
[4]Road Traffic Injury Research Center, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran

*Corresponding Author: Monir Kangari, Email: mnyrkngry@gmail.com

Abstract

Background: Delayed marriage has significant implications for fertility rates and population aging, leading to multiple challenges in demographic transitions. This study aimed to investigate the factors influencing delayed marriage among young people in Marand County, Northwestern Iran.

Methods: In this cross-sectional study, the threshold for delayed marriage was defined as 25 years of age for women and 27 years for men. A total of 390 individuals were selected as participants in the study using purposive sampling, divided into two groups: those with delayed marriage and those without. Data were collected through a researcher-designed questionnaire, the validity and reliability of which were evaluated and confirmed. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics as well as chi-square and independent samples t-tests via SPSS software.

Results: Of all participants, 213 individuals (54.6%) were male, and 315 participants (80.8%) had a university education. The mean age of participants was 30.1 years. The most desirable conditions for marriage among men were a combination of having a house, education, a car, and an adequate income, while for women, the favorable conditions included the family's financial status, education, and housing. The factors contributing to delayed marriage in the present study were a combination of economic and social elements, the most prominent of which included parental interference in spouse selection, preference for a high dowry (mahr), excessive family expectations, continuation of education, preference for permanent employment, adequate income, and home ownership.

Conclusion: Given that both economic and social factors were found to influence delayed marriage, it is essential to implement macro-level policies aimed at creating and expanding employment opportunities, as well as promoting cultural awareness and education for all members of society.

Keywords: Marriage, Delayed marriage, Barriers to marriage, Economic factors, Social factors

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Introduction

Marriage has long been regarded as the cornerstone of familial, cultural, and social stability in Iran, deeply rooted in religious traditions and social norms (1). As a pivotal life event, marriage not only signifies the union of two individuals but also the merging of families, thereby strengthening social cohesion and intergenerational continuity (2). In Iranian society, marriage is closely associated with concepts of adulthood, responsibility, and moral legitimacy, particularly for women, whose social status has historically been tied to marital roles. Despite its enduring importance, shifts in socio-economic and cultural dynamics have transformed perceptions and practices surrounding marriage, leading to emerging phenomena such as the delay in the age of marriage (1,3,4).

Globally, postponement of marriage age has emerged as one of the hallmarks of demographic transition, with the average age at first marriage steadily increasing in both developed and developing countries (5). For instance, in East Asia and Europe, the average age at first marriage now exceeds 30 years, driven by factors such as educational advancement and economic independence (5,6). Similar trends are evident in Iran, where the mean age at first marriage has risen from 19.9 to 24.0 years for women and from 23.8 to 28.3 years for men between 1986 and 2023 (7). This delay carries significant implications for fertility rates, population aging, and gender relations, posing various challenges for the country in terms of demographic change (3,8,9).

A multitude of interrelated factors underlie the postponement of marriage in Iran. Economic instability, including youth unemployment and escalating housing

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costs, has rendered marriage financially unattainable for many. Concurrently, the rapid expansion of higher education, particularly among women, has shifted priorities toward career advancement and self-sufficiency (3,10,11). Cultural transformations, such as the declining influence of arranged marriages and increasing acceptance of premarital relationships, further reflect a broader shift toward individualism and marital autonomy (11,12). Collectively, these factors challenge traditional norms; however, their complex interplay remains insufficiently examined within the existing literature.

The advent of modernity and the spread of modernist thought within Iranian society have profoundly influenced marriage, family formation, and the establishment of shared life. The rising age of marriage and the phenomenon of permanent singleness are among the outcomes associated with modernity. Many young people, driven by modern aspirations such as higher education, the pursuit of substantial income, car ownership, and suitable housing, postpone timely marriage, resulting in various personal and societal challenges, such as generational discontinuity, irregularities in fulfilling sexual needs, extramarital relationships, and psychological distress. For women, in particular, these issues are often compounded; as they age, many lose the opportunity to marry altogether or, in some cases, accept marriages with partners they would not have previously considered (13). Moreover, prolonged singlehood and the suppression of natural emotional and sexual needs may lead to profound psychosocial harm, disrupting individuals' ability to function effectively in social relationships (14).

To date, the factors contributing to delayed marriage among youth have not been examined in Marand County, located in East Azerbaijan Province. Thus, it is necessary to investigate the underlying causes and identify the determinants of marriage delay in this region to develop practical and effective strategies for preventing this phenomenon. Furthermore, considering the social, economic, and cultural similarities between Marand and other counties in northwestern Iran, the findings of this study can be generalized to neighboring regions as well. Accordingly, this study aimed to examine factors influencing the delayed marriage among youth in Marand County, East Azerbaijan Province, Iran.

Methods

This applied descriptive-analytical study was conducted using a cross-sectional design. The research population consisted of all young residents of Marand County in 2021. The mean marriage age was defined as 25 years for women and 27 years for men. Accordingly, women aged 25 and men aged 27 or older who had not yet married were categorized in the *delayed marriage* group, while those who had married before these ages were included in the *non-delayed marriage* group. According to statistics obtained from the Marand County Health Network, the number of individuals with delayed marriage was 46,437 (19,710 women and 26,727 men), while the number without delayed marriage was 31,278 (13,853 women and 17,425 men).

Sampling and Sample Size

The sample size was calculated using Cochran's formula (Formula 1).

$$n\frac{\frac{z^2 pq}{d^2}}{1+\frac{1}{N}\left|\frac{z^2 pq}{d^2}-1\right|}$$

Formula 1: Cochran's formula for sample size calculation

Where p and q were each set to 0.5, z was 1.96, d was 0.05, and the total population size (N), based on the data from the Marand County Health Network, was 77,715. Accordingly, the required sample size was estimated to be 382 participants. In total, 390 individuals were ultimately included in the study, with 195 participants assigned to each group (delayed and non-delayed marriage).

The participants in this study were selected through purposive sampling. Two trained interviewers were assigned to visit various parts of the city representing different socioeconomic levels and to administer the questionnaires. This approach was intended to approximate random sampling as closely as possible. Data collection was conducted by one male and one female interviewer. Both interviewers were trained by the research team regarding interviewing techniques and inclusion and exclusion criteria. Whenever possible, female participants were interviewed by the female interviewer, and male participants by the male interviewer. Before data collection, the participants' eligibility was assessed according to the inclusion criteria, and those who met the criteria were enrolled in the study. Throughout the sampling process, an effort was made to maintain a balanced distribution between the two groups (delayed and non-delayed marriage). To do so, the participants' age and marital status were continually monitored, and additional participants were recruited from the underrepresented group as needed to ensure sample balance.

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for participation in the study were being at least 25 years old for women and 27 years old for men, as well as expressing willingness to participate. The exclusion criteria were being younger than 25 years for women or younger than 27 years for men, and unwillingness to participate in the study.

Instrument

The data collection instrument used in this study was a researcher-designed questionnaire developed specifically

for this study. The questionnaire assessed factors contributing to delayed marriage, including continuation of higher education, parental interference in spouse selection, preference for a high dowry (mahr), unrealistic or excessive family expectations regarding their children's marriage, parents' education level, high wedding expenses, financial independence of women, permanent employment, sufficient income, independent housing, lack of governmental support for marriage, families' financial ability to provide dowries and household goods, and parents' income. These factors were assessed using both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("very low") to 5 ("very high"). Face and content validity of the questionnaire were confirmed qualitatively through expert review by specialists in demography, sociology, psychology, health education, and epidemiology. The internal consistency reliability of the instrument was also assessed, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be 0.86, indicating good reliability.

Data Analysis

Qualitative variables were described using frequency and percentage, while quantitative variables were presented as mean and standard deviation. The chi-square test was used to examine relationships between categorical variables, and the independent samples *t*-test was employed to compare mean values between the groups. Data analysis was performed using SPSS-23 software, and the significance level was set at $P < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided written informed consent, which was attached to the questionnaire. They were informed that participation in the study and responding to the questionnaire items were entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Participants were also assured that all information collected would remain confidential and accessible only to the research team. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences (IR.KMU.REC.1404.579) .

Results

In this study, out of a total of 390 participants, 213 individuals (54.6%) were male, and 240 participants (61.5%) were born in urban areas. A majority of participants, 315 individuals (80.8%), held a university degree. The mean age of the participants was 30.1 years, with an average of 31.3 years for men and 28.7 years for women. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the participants by marriage delay status in Marand County. As shown in the table, a statistically significant difference was observed between the *delayed marriage* and *non-delayed marriage* groups in terms of place of birth and educational attainment ($P < 0.001$). Most individuals born in urban areas were in the *delayed marriage* group (58.3%), whereas the majority of those born in rural areas were in the *non-delayed marriage* group (63.3%). Regarding education, most participants with a bachelor's degree or higher were in the *delayed marriage* group, while those with an associate degree or lower were primarily in the *non-delayed marriage* group.

Table 2 presents the factors influencing delayed marriage among youth in Marand County. As can be seen, the influencing factors were examined for two groups — *delayed marriage* and *non-delayed marriage*

Table 1. The characteristics of participants by marriage delay status

Variable	Categories	Delayed Marriage (n = 195)		Non-Delayed Marriage (n = 195)		*P* value*
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Gender	Female	98	55.4	79	44.6	0.053
	Male	97	45.5	116	54.5	
Age Group (Women)	25–27	42	63.6	24	36.4	0.104
	28–30	29	45.3	35	54.7	
	31 and above	27	57.4	20	42.6	
Age Group (Men)	27–29	26	41.9	36	58.1	0.155
	30–32	37	55.2	30	44.8	
	33 and above	34	40.5	50	59.5	
Place of Birth	Urban	140	58.3	100	41.7	<0.001
	Rural	55	36.7	95	63.3	
Education	Lower Education	0	0.0	11	100.0	<0.001
	Diploma	7	10.9	57	89.1	
	Associate's Degree	21	30.9	47	69.1	
	Bachelor's Degree	127	67.2	62	32.8	
	Master's Degree or Higher	40	69.0	18	31.0	

* *P*-values were calculated using the chi-square test.

Table 2. Factors influencing delayed marriage among youth in Marand County

Variable	Categories	Delayed marriage (n = 195)		Non-Delayed marriage (n = 195)		*P* value*
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Individual Employment Status	Employed	129	52.0	119	48.0	0.293
	Unemployed	66	46.5	76	53.5	
Father's Employment Status	Employed	106	46.1	124	53.9	<0.001
	Unemployed	43	72.9	16	27.1	
	Seasonal Unemployment	24	63.2	14	36.8	
	Deceased	22	34.9	41	65.1	
Mother's Employment Status	Employed	42	53.2	37	46.8	0.039
	Unemployed	136	52.3	124	47.7	
	Seasonal Unemployment	13	40.6	19	59.4	
	Deceased	4	21.1	15	78.9	
Individual Monthly Expenses	High (over 100 million IRR)	62	63.3	36	36.7	0.004
	Moderate (50–100 million IRR)	86	42.8	115	57.2	
	Low (below 50 million IRR)	47	51.6	44	48.4	
Household Monthly Expenses	High (over 100 million IRR)	122	48.6	129	51.4	0.584
	Moderate (50–100 million IRR)	64	53.8	55	46.2	
	Low (below 50 million IRR)	9	45.0	11	55.0	
Household Financial Status	Excellent	14	29.2	34	70.8	<0.001
	Good	31	40.8	45	59.2	
	Average	113	51.1	108	48.9	
	Poor	37	82.2	8	17.8	
Individual Housing Status	Owned	74	35.4	135	64.6	<0.001
	Not Owned	121	66.9	60	33.1	
Household Housing Status	Private	142	47.2	159	52.8	0.040
	Rental/Mortgaged/ Organizational	53	59.6	36	40.4	
Father's Education Level	Illiterate	31	44.9	38	55.1	0.003
	Below Diploma	25	34.7	47	65.3	
	Diploma	67	62.6	40	37.4	
	University	72	50.7	70	49.3	
Mother's Education Level	Illiterate	53	35.1	98	64.9	<0.001
	Below Diploma	37	43.5	48	56.5	
	Diploma	68	66.7	34	33.3	
	University	37	71.2	15	28.8	
Importance of Dowry (Mahr)	Yes	34	29.3	82	70.7	<0.001
	No	161	58.8	113	41.2	
Encounter with a Suitable Partner	Yes	41	22.9	138	77.1	<0.001
	No	154	73.0	57	27.0	
Government Support	Yes	12	20.3	47	79.7	<0.001
	No	183	55.3	148	44.7	

* *P*-values were calculated using the chi-square test.

— for each variable, and statistical significance was determined using the chi-square test. Among the results, significant differences were observed between the two groups with respect to father's employment status, mother's employment status, individual's monthly expenses, household's financial status, individual's housing status, household's housing status, father's education level, mother's education level, readiness for marriage, importance of dowry (mahr), encounter with a suitable partner, and government support. However, no statistically significant difference was found between the two groups regarding individual employment status and household monthly expenses.

Table 3 presents the participants' perspectives on the

Table 3. The participants' views on ideal conditions for marriage for men and women by marriage delay status

Ideal Marriage Conditions (Participants' Perspective)		Delayed Marriage (n=195)		Non-Delayed Marriage (n=195)		*P* value*
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Ideal Conditions for Men	Housing+Car+Education	43	22.1	27	13.8	0.015
	Job+Adequate Income	40	20.5	36	18.5	
	Housing+Job+Education	31	15.9	28	14.4	
	Job+Car+Education	29	14.9	44	22.6	
	Housing+Adequate Income+Education	28	14.4	46	23.6	
	Housing only	24	12.3	14	7.2	
Ideal Conditions for Women	Family's Favorable Financial Status	79	40.5	96	49.2	0.007
	Education+Job	49	25.1	37	19.0	
	Housing+Education	43	22.1	25	12.8	
	Housing only	12	6.2	27	13.8	
	Car+Job	12	6.2	10	5.1	

* *P* values were calculated using the chi-square test.

ideal conditions for marriage. To complete this section of the questionnaire, all participants were asked to specify the desirable conditions for marriage for both men and women. As shown in Table 3, participants considered a combination of housing, education, car ownership, and adequate income as the ideal conditions for men's marriage. Furthermore, housing was identified as the most important factor, followed by education. Conversely, for women, participants reported that the family's favorable financial status constituted the most important condition for marriage, followed by education and then housing, which were also regarded as significant prerequisites for marriage.

Discussion

This study examined the factors influencing delayed marriage among youth in Marand County, East Azerbaijan Province. Variables such as individual employment status, parental employment, individual and household monthly expenses, household financial status, individual and household housing status, education of the individual and parents, ideal marriage conditions, dowry (*mahr*), government support, and other factors were investigated. Broadly, the factors affecting delayed marriage can be categorized into social and economic factors. Social factors include education, family expectations, and parental involvement in spouse selection, whereas economic factors encompass housing, employment, income, and financial capacity to provide a dowry and wedding expenses.

The findings revealed a significant difference between higher education and delayed marriage. Specifically, the level of educational attainment differed significantly between the delayed and non-delayed marriage groups. These findings are consistent with most similar studies (15-17), all of which emphasized that education is a fundamental factor in postponing marriage. Higher educational levels require more time to complete, which inherently delays the timing of marriage. Another critical issue is the challenge of integrating highly educated individuals into the labor market, which also contributes to delayed marriage. Applying the Rational Choice Theory to marriage, it can be argued that individuals choose to marry when they perceive benefits, such as maintaining or enhancing their social status. When these perceived benefits are unavailable, the phenomenon of delayed marriage emerges in the community. Currently, young people show a stronger inclination toward higher education, perhaps because higher educational levels increase the perceived value of lost opportunities. Consequently, youth may prioritize continuing education over marriage to secure their social and economic position.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study indicated a statistically significant association between parental education and the delayed marriage of their children. Specifically, the higher the educational level of the parents, particularly the mother, the greater the likelihood of delayed marriage among their children. Conversely, individuals whose parents have lower educational levels are more likely to marry at a younger age (18). These findings are aligned with the results of the present study.

The present study also found a significant difference between the delayed and non-delayed marriage groups regarding the prevalence of high dowries (*mahr*). Undoubtedly, the culture of a society is one of the most important determinants of marriage age, and the previously discussed factors are closely intertwined with cultural norms. Social values and customary practices define a set of prerequisites for marriage, including the appropriate age for marriage. Accordingly, ceremonial customs and obligations, which are sometimes prevalent in society, play a crucial role. For example, in a society like Iran, practices such as high dowries, excessive *shirbhah* (bridewealth), extravagant dowries, costly wedding ceremonies, and high expectations of the groom regarding job, housing, and car ownership often prevent young couples from marrying at the appropriate time. This is because they, and often their

parents, must spend a considerable period working to meet these financial demands.

The present study also found a significant difference between the two groups regarding high family expectations and excessive parental interference in spouse selection. These findings are consistent with numerous studies (15-19), which reported that strict family expectations, parental interference in choosing a spouse, and the normalization of high dowries are significantly associated with delayed marriage. However, the results of this study are not aligned with the findings of Nosrati-Nejad et al. (2016), who concluded that, among social factors, neither high family expectations nor excessive parental involvement significantly affected delayed marriage (20).

The present study also identified a statistically significant association between economic factors and delayed marriage. Variables such as employment status, job type, income, housing conditions, high marriage-related expenses, dowry, and household goods, all considered economic factors, showed significant correlations with delayed marriage. These findings are consistent with previous studies (15-19), which highlighted that employment status, job type, educational attainment, high marriage costs, dowry, household goods, elevated expectations of couples and families, the presence of older unmarried siblings, lack of government support, decision-making hesitancy, and housing conditions can all contribute to delayed marriage. Individuals who are economically secure are generally more likely to marry without hesitation and with greater ease.

The findings from the present study indicated that the lack of access to a suitable (permanent) job differed significantly between the delayed and non-delayed marriage groups. However, when considering overall employment status, no significant statistical difference was observed between the two groups. A further analysis by gender revealed that women in the delayed marriage group were more likely to be employed, whereas men in the same group were less likely to be employed. Conversely, women without delayed marriage were less employed, and men without delayed marriage were more employed. These findings suggest that employment may contribute to delayed marriage for women, as higher female employment appears to coincide with the postponement of marriage. In contrast, employment seems to encourage marriage for men, indicating that having a job is a motivating factor for men to marry, while it may act as a barrier for women.

Despite its strengths, this study had several limitations. One limitation was the use of purposive sampling. Although efforts were made to approximate random sampling, the method does not fully replicate a truly random sample. Another limitation concerns the generalizability of the findings. Considering the social and cultural context of Marand County and its similarities with neighboring counties and provinces, the results may be generalizable to other counties in East and West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and possibly Zanjan. However, extending these findings to other regions of Iran remains uncertain and should be approached with caution.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that a portion of the reasons for delayed marriage among youth is related to unfavorable economic conditions. Thus, macro-level policies aimed at improving economic conditions through the creation and expansion of employment opportunities are necessary. On the other hand, part of the reasons for delayed marriage are social factors. Accordingly, structured cultural awareness and educational programs targeting all members of the community, including both youth and their parents, should be implemented through various media channels.

Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization: Sahar Zari, Monir Kangari, Ali Jafari-Khounigh
Data curation: Sahar Zari, Monir Kangari
Formal analysis: Sahar Zari, Monir Kangari, Ali Jafari-Khounigh
Investigation: Sahar Zari, Monir Kangari
Methodology: Sahar Zari, Monir Kangari, Ali Jafari-Khounigh
Project administration: Sahar Zari, Monir Kangari
Supervision: Monir Kangari
Validation: Sahar Zari, Monir Kangari, Ali Jafari-Khounigh
Writing–original draft: Sahar Zari
Writing–review & editing: Sahar Zari, Monir Kangari, Ali Jafari-Khounigh

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical Approval

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